

Year B Baptism of the Lord

Mark 1:7-11

Willpower Alone Is Not Enough

John Shea once wrote a haunting poem about John the Baptist. The poem begins with the Baptist in prison, hearing the dancing above his head and knowing that this is soon to culminate in his being beheaded. Strangely, he's not too upset. Herod is about to give Herodias' daughter half his Kingdom and John feels that he might as well die in the bargain, given that he's only half a man. Why does he feel only half a man? Because, as the poem puts it, he's only a half-prophet who can only do a half-job. Thus thinks the Baptist:

I can denounce a king, but I cannot enthrone one.

I can strip an idol of its power, but I cannot reveal the true God

I can wash the soul in sand, but I cannot dress it in white.

I can devour the word of the Lord like wild honey, but I cannot lace his sandal.

I can condemn sin, but I cannot bear it away.

Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

John the Baptist is aware of both his strength and his impotency. He can point out what's wrong and what should be done, but after that, he's helpless, with nothing to offer in terms of the strength needed to correct the wrong.

In essence, that's what we bring to any situation when we criticize something. We are able, often with brilliance and clarity, to show what's wrong. That contribution, like John the Baptist's, is not to be undervalued. The gospels tell us that, next to Jesus, there isn't anyone more important than John the Baptist. But, like John,

criticism too is only a half-job, a half-prophecy: It can denounce a king, by showing what's wrong, and it can wash the soul in sand, by blasting off layers of accumulated rust and dirt, but ultimately it can't empower us to correct anything. Something else is needed. What?

Anyone who has ever tried to overcome an addiction can answer that question. A clear head, a clear vision of what's to be done, and a solid resolution to leave a bad habit behind is only a half-job, a first step, an important one, but only an initial one. The tough part is still ahead: Where to find and how to sustain the strength needed to actually change our behaviour and give up a bad habit? Anyone who has ever given up an addiction will tell you that, in the end, they didn't do it by willpower, or at least certainly not by willpower alone. Grace and community were needed and they were what ultimately provided what willpower alone could not.

At one point in the gospels, Jesus tells his disciples that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. The disciples are stunned and Peter responds by saying: If that is the case than it is impossible! Jesus appreciates that response and adds: It is impossible for humans, but not for God. Anybody who is in recovery from an addiction knows exactly what Jesus means by that. They've experienced it: They know that is impossible for them to give up the object of their addiction – and yet they are giving it up, not by their own willpower, but by some higher power, grace.

The gospels speak of this as a baptism and they speaks of two kinds of baptisms: the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus, adding that John's baptism is only a preparation for Jesus' baptism. What's John's baptism? It's a baptism of repentance, a realization of what we are doing wrong and a clear resolution to correct our bad behavior. What's Jesus' baptism? It's an entry into grace and community in such a way that it empowers us internally to do what is impossible for us to do by our willpower alone.

But how does this work? Is grace a kind of magic? No. It's not magic. All psychic, emotional, and spiritual energy is, by definition, beyond a simple phenomenological understanding. Simply put, that means that we can't lay out its inner plumbing. There's a mystery to all energy. But what we can lay out empirically is its effect: spiritual energy works. Grace works. This has been proven inside the experience of thousands of people (many of them atheists) who have been able to find an energy inside them that clearly does not come from them and yet empowers them beyond their willpower alone. Ask any addict in recovery about this.

Sadly, many of us, who are solid believers, still haven't grasped the lesson. We're still trying to live out our lives by John's baptism alone, that is, by our own willpower. That makes us wonderful critics but leaves us mostly powerless to actually change our own lives. What we are looking for, and desperately need, is a deeper immersion into the baptism of Jesus, that is, into community and grace.

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